

Eötvös Loránd University
Faculty of Humanities

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION THESES

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Existential Poetry in the Central European Region: A Comparative Analysis of the Poetry
of János Pilinszky and Slavko Mihalić

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Budapest, 2014

Doctoral Dissertation Theses

The aim of the following doctoral dissertation is to emphasize certain typological parallels, which have not been touched upon yet by the comparative studies of Hungarian and Croatian literature. Our primary goal is to reconstruct the lyrical ontology presented by the poems of Pilinszky and Mihalić and to compare these ontologies to the ideas of the key figures of Existentialism, showing how the two poets rewrite, question and dialogize with these ideas. Our final goal is to prove that the poetry of János Pilinszky and Slavko Mihalić constitute a unique regional type of poetry we termed Central European Existentialist poetry. Owing to its ontological orientation and the similarity of the questions raised regarding to the being, this type of poetry is closely related to the Western Existentialist literature. However, its views about authentic being, the freedom of the lyric subject and the strategies chosen by them are very different.

The dissertation consists of six units. The purpose of the first chapter is to present the most important discourses of Existentialist philosophy in order to present the context within which we would like to place and analyse the oeuvre of Pilinszky and Mihalić. Besides presenting the ontology of Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone Weil, it also analyses the philosophical methods used by these thinkers.

The second chapter compares the place of the two authors in literary history, considering their context and reception as well. Pilinszky János and Slavko Mihalić are both epoch-making poets who played a key role in forming the lyric profile of the Hungarian and the Croatian second modernity. These two authors belong to a similar generation: Pilinszky was born in 1921, and his first book, *Trapéz és korlát* was published in 1942. Slavko Mihalić was born in 1928, and his first book was, *Komorna muzika* published in 1954, after World War II. Soon after that, both authors became a leading figure of their generation, and the lyric discourse initiated by them is considered by the literary historians to be one of the most influential discourses of the Hungarian and the Croatian second modernity, which has retained its continuity even until now. Rethinking the heritage of modernity, the poetry of Pilinszky and Mihalić can be both

considered to be an important precursor to postmodern poetry, constituting a connecting link between modern and postmodern poetry.

The third chapter of the dissertation provides an overview of the methodology used. In the dissertation, we reconstructed the lyric ontology of Pilinszky and Mihalić relying on the hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer. The reason why we use this theoretical background is the ontological orientation of the two oeuvres and their focus on the analysis of dispositions and specific situations. Another reason is that the oeuvres raise several questions, which are also important topics of the hermeneutic discourse, like the importance of art in revealing the true face of being, and the possibility of grasping the phenomenon of being by means of language. Thus the lyric ontology of Pilinszky and Mihalić is reconstructed as a conscious effort of a conscious subject to understand being, in order to reveal the external impulses and inner reflexions which affect the process, and the changes of horizon within the process itself.

The fourth and the fifth chapter of the dissertation reconstruct the lyric ontology of János Pilinszky and Slavko Mihalić. The two chapters have similar structure: after revealing the construction of the subject itself and enumerating the main poetical devices used in the texts, we discuss the way the lyric subject relates to its own being, the way it differentiates between authentic and inauthentic being in the two lyric ontologies, and the way its activity can be interpreted as a conscious process of understanding and interpreting being.

János Pilinszky and Slavko Mihalić, just like the works of the Existentialist thinkers discussed in the 2nd chapter, also commence their ontological examinations from the subject's point of view. Just like Western Existentialists, they reveal the real face of being on the basis of the common experience of human beings, most of which can only be accessed by introspection. In the poems of Pilinszky and Mihalić the presence of the lyric subject and its unique perspective is so strong that it determines the entire poem – not only its subject, but its structure, too. Their isolated position and intense focus on self-analysis and self-reflection strongly reminds to the works of Western Existentialist thinkers, just like the conscious analysis of boundary situations and dispositions in order to the more profound analysis of being.

In this poetic universe, however – contrary to the works of Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre – the disposition of anxiety reveals not the infinity of different choices, but

rather the fact that world is perceived as a source of constant threats coming from every direction, which the subject faces, completely defenceless. The unpleasant feelings are evoked not by facing the situations of decision-making, but by facing the fact that the subject is completely exposed to suffering, which in Pilinszky's poetry becomes a boundary situation in its own right. Another important boundary situation is death which is perceived as an integrant and inalienable part of human life by both Central European poets. For the lyrics subjects of Pilinszky's and Mihalić's oeuvre, the possibility of death renders the entire life meaningless, which resembles to the ideas expressed in Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus*. Later, however, both lyric ontologies reach a conclusion similar to Heidegger's – that is, the experience of death can be also viewed as a chance: a chance for the subject to develop an authentic relationship to its own life.

Both Pilinszky's and Mihalić's lyric speaker finds their existence and its boundaries to be a burden, and is desperately trying to get out of them, even risking their annihilation. This attitude is similar to the state of mind, which Kierkegaard termed "despair", in which the lyric subject "does not want to be themselves". This desire is also articulated by the imagery of the poems – the lyric subject reject the ordered and limited type of existence represented by the cosmos, and yearns for the limitlessness of the "water-chaos".

Unlike Sartre's plays and novels, Pilinszky's and Mihalić's poems do not thematize the question of decision and self-realization, neither they articulate the possibility that the lyric subject could change their situation by shaping the surrounding world or by setting society-related goals. Thus, both Central European poets construct a passive lyric subject, which leads a beingless existence, is unable to act and make decisions, and thus is unable to shape their destiny. There is only one question when they have an actual choice: whether they relate to their being in an authentic way, that is, whether they accept the fact and the conditions of its being. In Mihalić's case, this question is raised in relation to the experience of absurdity. In Pilinszky's case, however, it is inseparably connected to the subject's relationship with God.

The poetic representations of the two ontologies also have many similar characteristics. Pilinszky and Mihalić both use a transparent, easily accessible imagery consisting of well-known symbols to present their ontological conclusions in a tangible way. They both often use archetypical symbols, which are, owing to their universal validity, especially suitable for dealing with ontological issues. By subverting these

archetypical symbols, Pilinszky and Mihalić make the absurdness of the world more tangible, and show how revealing the sheer absurdness of the world can bring the plasticity and interpretative value of these ancient, universally valued topoi into question, thus destabilizing language and poetry itself.

In his first book of poems, *Komorna muzika*, Mihalić develops a type of free verse on the basis of the lyric discourse initiated by Antun Branko Šimić, which he uses consistently until his last book. However, Pilinszky writes his first poems in a iambic diction showing the influence of Mihály Babits and Attila József, and he only switches to free verse in *Nagyvárosi ikonok*. Free verse enables the poets to develop a concise, exact way of expression, which helps to foreground the semantic layer of the poems without any distraction.

It also enables them to fully develop the impersonal and objective way of depiction to which both poets aspire from the beginnings. Initially, just like Mihalić, Pilinszky uses reification to present the beingless existence of the lyric subject. Later, however, the Hungarian poet uses these poetic devices to represent the conscious efforts of the lyric subject to abolish their personality.

Figures of silence and paradoxes enable the lyric depiction of the absurd experience, just like the visionary imagery which serves the purpose of expressing those experiences which is "outside" or "below" logical cognition (cf. Živkovic 1985: 870-871).

The dissertation argues that the oeuvre of the Hungarian and the Croatian poet can be both read as a progressive interpretation of being, whose processuality is explicitly reflected upon by the poets themselves. In the case of both oeuvres, the horizon of the subject interpreting their being is constituted by their ontic understanding of being, their basic structure of being and their facticity. The latter includes the context of the interpretative process determined by exact spatial and temporal coordinates and the related events whose reception and analysis influences the subject's understanding of being as much as the world around them (taken in an abstract and universal sense of the word), their relationship with the other subjects or the relationship of the subject with the transcendence. In the following subchapters of the chapters on Pilinszky and Mihalić, we unfold the process of understanding being, focusing on the relation of the lyric subject with the surrounding world, with the other subjects around them and with the transcendence, also revealing the way they are trying to understand themselves on the

basis of these relations. Our purpose is to reveal how the interaction with the surrounding world, with the other subjects and with the transcendence and the consequences of this interaction contributes to the transformation of the lyric subject's idea of being and their relation to the being (including their relation to their own being).

In Sartre's and Camus's early works, the the absurdity of being is not directly available, rather it is revealed by intellectual reflexion. In Pilinszky's and Mihalić's poetry, however, the experience of the absurd is painfully tangible from the beginnings. In the oeuvres of both Central European poets, a subject is constructed whose physical integrity and their very being is in constant danger. Their poems depict an unfriendly and essentially unlivable universe where people lead a lonely existence among dreadful physical and psychical pains, not having any way out except death.

In Pilinszky's and Mihalić's poems, the aura of the Heideggerian *Unheimlichkeit* has much more important role than in the works of Western Existentialists. In Mihalić's poems, the lyric subject cannot find peace even in their home and in the nature, which implies that orderliness is a mere illusion, and the world is in fact ruled by chaos. In Pilinszky's poems, there are no safe places left, and the subject is standing face to face with the unfriendly Universe. Beside their defencelessness, the reason of their anxiety is of intellectual nature: the despair caused by the unintelligibility and absurdity of the world.

The root cause of this despair is the failure of the intellect trying to solve the riddle of the universe. The world is structured by monotonous repetitions without purpose on one hand, and by unforeseeable events on the other. The intellect is unable to find any inherent system in it, or deduce the existence of a transcendent intelligence which would warrant the presence of a structure, even if it is not accessible from a human horizon. The subject, however, recognizes the face of the absurd in the relations between the other subjects, too.

One has to specifically emphasize the importance of those poems in which the depiction of the forces jeopardizing the integrity of the subject receives unambiguous political connotations. In Pilinszky's and Mihalić's poetry, the figure of the condemned prisoner is the symbol of the subject thrown into being, condemned to death, waging a hopeless fight against the boundaries of its existence. But the figure of the prisoner, just like the imagery consisting of executions, scaffolds, concentration camps, torture devices and secret agents, also allude to the everyday reality of the totalitarian dictatorships.

However, the exact determination of the spatial and temporal coordinates of the context, does not undermine the realization of the intention to express truths of ontological validity. The poems not only depict the way total control of the Central European dictatorships restricts the boundaries of being-in-the-world even more, but they also serve as an extreme parable of the absurdness of existence comparable to Camus' *The Plague*.

The relations to other subjects are quite problematical in both oeuvres: the inability to connect to others, the motive of loneliness in a crowd, "*bellum omnia contra omnes*" and the paranoid visions are present in the poems of Pilinszky and Mihalić, too. The lyric subject of Mihalić's poems keeps distance from the crowd in order to retain their moral integrity. To them, other people represent totalitarian dictatorship, and they fear that the interaction with them might force them into the compromises they so desperately want to avoid. Guilt and sense of corruption resulting from inauthentic existence is already present in the poem *Metamorfoza*, which outlines Mihalić's ontological program. By the end of the oeuvre, the lyric subject reaches the state of swamp (*Močvara*), which cannot be purged anymore, only exsiccated. From Pilinszky's point of view, the most important moral problem of the absurd universe is the suffering of the innocent ones. This is either presented in first person singular, from the perspective of the lyric subject, or by depicting the suffering of other subjects, caused by the forces of nature or by each other. Pilinszky's subject is able to reframe their destruction by other subjects as a chance for salvation, leaving the Kierkegaardian ethical state and moving on to the Kierkegaardian religious state. In Mihalić's oeuvre, however, the distance of the lyric subject from other subjects grows even further. His moral judgement gradually becomes even more acute, and the depiction of other subjects gradually becomes more and more objectified.

On the basis of the metaphors and cultural references of the poems, one can conclude that the perspective of Christianity is central to the receptive horizon of both poets. Thus, it is not accidental that the poems underline the transcendence as one of the key factors, which determine the being-in-the-world of the lyric subject. In the earliest poems of Pilinszky and Mihalić, the lyric subject questions the existence of God based on their primary experience of being-in-the-world. The evil god and the passive god known from Camus' and Sartre's works appear in the poems of both authors. Pilinszky, the self-

proclaimed Christian poet, goes as far as to deny the existence of God. In Mihalić's poetry, however, the question of God's existence does not arise, not even as a possibility.

In Pilinszky's poems, ontology and metaphysics have the same priority. Faith in God and everyday experiences of the lyric subject are in sharp contradiction, which the lyric subject aims to resolve by their conscious effort to understand their being. This very dissonance is in the focus of Camus's, Kierkegaard's, Jaspers' and Weil's works who all emphasize that our experiences regarding the physical world and the idea of the omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent being seem to be utterly incompatible. These authors find different ways to resolve this dilemma. Camus rejects the belief in God, Kierkegaard and Weil make the „leap of faith“, while Jaspers' turn towards the transcendent sphere is induced precisely by the recognition of the absurdness of existence. In Pilinszky's early poems, the relation of the subject on the quest of understanding its being towards the transcendence oscillates between the Camusian and the Jaspersian type. In the later poems, however, the subject will try to find the way toward the Kierkegaardian religious state, which will be facilitated by the reception of Simone Weil's ideas.

In Mihalić's poetry, however, the ontological perspective has definite priority. For him, the absurdity of existence is so overwhelming that the possibility of God's existence does not even occur to him. Just like Camus and Sartre, Mihalić's poems repeat Nietzsche's conclusion – “God is dead” – over and over. The subject reaches this conclusion by realizing that the universal measures have become obsolete, which they conclude on an a posteriori basis, by regarding the moral disorientation of the people around them. By and by, the complaints regarding the crisis of values become louder and louder and the yearning for a universal compass of values – for the transcendent power itself – becomes more and more intense. *Svršetak znacenja*, the representative poem concluding Mihalić's oeuvre, openly states the ultimate failure of the attempts of the people to interpret and/or give meaning to the world around them. This poem states that God is the only one who is able to give meaning to the world and to the existents in it, thus they are the only one who is able to create measures on the basis of which the world and people in it can be judged.

In Pilinszky's oeuvre, the processuality of understanding being is more expressed. The original aim of the lyric subject is to resolve the tension between the desire for the

union with God and the pain of existing in an absurd world devoid of God, but in a wider sense of the word, they want to transcend the contradiction between God's existence and the absurdity of being. The first change of horizon occurs due to the experience of World War II: the experience of extreme suffering not only makes the lyric subject realize that other people go through the same suffering as well, but it also contributes to the desintegration of their former perspective. In the process of understanding being, the subject tries to reframe their experience from the horizon of the Passion of Christ. This process is facilitated by Simone Weil's ideas, by Dostoyevsky's texts read through the lens of Simone Weil's texts, and also by the polemy with Camus, which make the subject realize that the experience of the absurdity of existence stems from the human perspective. The reason why the world seems to be unreasonable for us is that we cannot make sense out of it from a human perspective, and we cannot interpret it using our human concepts. Pilinszky's poems reveal the constructed nature of this human perspective and commences its deconstruction. Thus the subject occupied with the understanding of being achieves their goal through several changes of horizon, by reasking the original question and rethinking it on the basis of their previous experience.

Slavko Mihalić, however, drafts his ontological program in his first book of poetry, *Komorna muzika*. The poem *Metamorfoza* juxtaposes the subject's nothingness with the corrupting effect of the external structure, pointing out that the subject has no other choice but facing the absurdity of their existence, and – just like Camus' Sisyphus – making his living-space more comfortable. In the process of understanding being, the subject includes more and more areas of being into the interpretation, from the problems of nature and love to the universe and transcendence. From the second half of the oeuvre, reflecting upon problems of the society and the totalitarian dictatorship becomes more and more important. However, Mihalić's poems lack the widespread intertextual discourse and the horizon changes we see in Pilinszky's oeuvre. The lyric subject does not re-evaluate their original view of the structure of being, neither they reframe their questions and strategies of resolution. After the in-depth analysis of the issues of society, however, thematization of the societal anomy, and the moral engagement of the lyric subject resulting from that, becomes more and more emphatic. The assertion of this, together with the recognition of the lyric subject's own moral

collapse described in the poem *Močvara* yield the conclusion that the project drafted in *Komorna muzika* is doomed to failure.